Mad in America
SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

My Story of Surviving Psychiatry

By **Mad in the UK** - August 10, 2024

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared on Mad in the UK. The author, Catherine Heseltine, is a psychiatric survivor, a mum to three wonderful children and a political activist in London.

I want to start my story at the end. It will be easier to dive into the depths of darkness and despair that I went through as a mental health patient if I start with a story of hope.

I am typing this blog in the back of a taxi wending its way to the airport through the hilly landscape of Sardinia, my beautiful daughter sleeping in the seat beside me.

This holiday has been amazing. How heaven could possibly be more beautiful than this island I can't imagine! But most of all it's been beautiful because I have seen more of my daughter's smile than I have ever seen since I was discharged from a locked psychiatric ward in a totally traumatised and drugged state nearly 4 years ago.

At the age of 41, I was sectioned under the Mental Health Act in the midst of the Covid pandemic in the early autumn of 2020 in the throes of an episode of psychosis. That was in fact my second stint in a

locked psychiatric ward. Eleven years earlier a deeply damaging romantic relationship had coincided with a series of other stressful events and precipitated a manic episode, which then progressed to psychosis once I was trapped in the terrifying environment of the psychiatric ward.

I was desperately distressed and sleep deprived and traumatised from having had a whole team of male police officers grab me and force me—struggling against them with every ounce of strength I had—into a metal cage in the back of their van.

The claustrophobia of the psychiatric ward, this strange and stifling series of confusing corridors that the police had delivered me to, was overwhelming. I ran frantically around in circles, trying to open every door I could find.

Can you imagine how it felt for me in that state to then repeatedly have my trousers and knickers forced down by men who were painfully pinning me down, then feel the needle penetrate my bottom, and soon feel my mind and body slip out of my control as the tranquillisers took their effect on me?

Then my family and friends tell me it's good I am in a place where I am being looked after and helped.

Back in 2009 I was incredibly blessed to have a couple of my fellow patients who comforted me, listened to me and took care of me. The trust they built is what I believe pulled me back out of psychosis and into the reality I shared with them.

In October 2009 I was discharged after 3 very long weeks and I quickly concluded that the 'antipsychotics' I had been forced to take were numbing my feelings and dulling my thinking in a debilitating way. I went cold turkey on the drugs, only informing my community psychiatrist much later on. It was only recently that I realised that nobody had warned me how dangerous it can be to abruptly stop psychiatric drugs and how withdrawal syndrome may have been a destabilising factor for me during that period.

The shock of having been sectioned sent me into a long period of black depression that was many, many times more hopeless than any depression I had experienced before. The occupational therapist did not allow me back to my work as a nursery teacher for months and months and I languished in limbo.

Fortunately, the 2010 election campaign was launched the next spring and as a seasoned political activist I rediscovered a purpose in life, hitting the streets with leaflets alongside my fellow activists.

I was still under the "care" of the Early Intervention Service as an outpatient but after my treatment in hospital I didn't want my life to be intervened in by mental health professionals. When I found that no helpful psychological support was going to be provided and I felt that mental health services were doing nothing but undermine me I negotiated attendance at appointments down to once every three months. It felt like a probation service and it didn't occur to me I had a right to actually leave.

I buried the shame-filled secret of having been sectioned and kept it cut off in a separate section of my mind. Thankfully though, browsing a bookshop one day, I came across psychologist Richard Bentall's book *Madness Explained—Psychosis and Human Nature.* Despite the fact that it is quite an academic

and scientific book I read it with tears sometimes trickling down my face. Bentall's description of how the psychological processes powering psychosis are an extreme end of the spectrum of ways we all interpret and experience our world made me feel fully human and understood by another human being again, for the first time since the horrific experience of being sectioned.

But at 31 I really didn't want to look back at what I had been through as an inpatient. All I wanted to do was get on with my life and soon I found a new relationship, got married and within months I was expecting my first baby.

What any woman who announces that she's pregnant wants to hear is "congratulations, so happy for you, you're going to be a wonderful mother". The actions of mental health services when I told them I was pregnant sent the message, "it's panic stations everyone—the mentally unstable woman is having a baby. She's very likely to go mad immediately after giving birth and even if she doesn't, we don't trust her with a vulnerable child".

I was lucky enough to be able to afford private midwives for homebirths to escape the threat of having the speed, coherence and emotional animation of my speech monitored in the hours and days around birth for possible signs of mania, by professionals who might ultimately try to have me locked up again. I was terrified any complications with the birth would land me in hospital where I knew NHS midwives worked hand-in-hand with the psychiatric system—my mental health history felt like having a criminal record. Thank God all went smoothly with the home birth and over the five years that followed I went on to give birth to two more wonderful children at home with independent midwives—the only indignity I had to undergo was health visitors who interrogated me each time about the history of psychosis that was detailed in my medical notes.

The ripples of my high and low periods during those early years of motherhood were never the kind of waves that built to a storm. But when my mother became suicidally depressed and I had to juggle looking after 3 very young children with being her main carer for several years I started to struggle to stay afloat mentally and emotionally. Then in 2020 the impact of being locked down in a deeply dysfunctional marriage swelled the underlying currents of past events and traumas, causing a huge wave of psychological distress that carried me right back into the arms of the psychiatric system.

Again, I was subjected to the trauma of being taken in by police, being subjected to forced injection and also placed in a "seclusion room"—a cowardly euphemism for a solitary confinement cell with no less than 3 observation windows looking into it, including one facing directly onto the toilet and shower.

Even when I was released from isolation onto a ward, as a headscarf-wearing Muslim woman I found the male members of staff peeping through the window in my bedroom door to observe me every 15 minutes or so particularly invasive. These observations throughout the day and night made me feel like a scientific specimen to be stared at rather than a woman worthy of any dignity or respect.

And I was all too aware of reports of shocking numbers of rapes and sexual assaults on psychiatric wards that I had read when I discovered online psychiatric survivor forums, and even reports in the mainstream media. Psychiatric patients make the perfect victims because nobody believes what mad people say.

But most devastating of all was the fear that the state did not trust me with my own children. I remember the nurse taking the full names and dates of birth of my children to give to social services. But most of all I remember the heartbreakingly haunted look in the eyes of the mothers I then met on that ward who had had their children taken from them.

I was released at the end of my 28 day section but mentally I did not leave for years to come. I took a serious case of Stockholm Syndrome home with me in the taxi I left in that late October day in 2020. Unlike after my first admission I internalised my new self-image as a bipolar psychiatric patient and it ended up literally disabling me.

I had serious problems in my marriage that had helped drive me to the point of madness when they came on top of previous experiences of trauma and deep emotional wounds going all the way back to early childhood. But the damaging dynamic I felt trapped in at home was a refuge and relief compared to the treatment I had been subjected to in psychiatric hospital that I had experienced as no less than torture.

Mental health services automatically referred to my husband as my “carer” and I always wanted him to attend appointments with me because showing I had good “social support” felt essential to protecting myself and my children from the power of the system.

We were nonetheless put through two social services investigations soon after I was discharged. The half hour I spent having my 3 year old son assessed by a health visitor who spoke to me as if I was a toddler myself was the most humiliating and terrifying 30 minutes of my entire life. By contrast she spoke to my husband as the sane saviour she could trust with the children, praising his heroic loyalty in looking after me as well.

Above all what drained my hope, disempowered me and made me feel isolated from the rest of humanity was accepting that I had a mental disorder—a brain that was different and deficient due to my bad genes. I then perceived my own feelings and thoughts as meaningless symptoms of my mental illness, that needed to be treated with psychiatric drugs.

This belief that there was something fundamentally wrong with me and fundamentally different about me reinforced the psychological damage done to me previously by repeated experiences of abuse, rejection, and discrimination. And having been forcibly removed from society and locked away like a criminal felt like the ultimate social rejection.

I could no longer function effectively as the loving mother I had been. To make matters worse I had akathisia from the ‘antipsychotic’ I was on—a devastating physical reaction to the drug which made my legs feel so restless I literally could not sit down. I even had to eat my meals standing up and rocking from side to side. All that my daughters wanted was for Mummy to sit with them on the sofa and watch My Little Pony together and they couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t do that when they were begging me to snuggle up with them just for one episode at least.

Over the next three and a half years my life spiralled into a debilitating cycle of depression and mania with two more traumatic times tipping over into psychosis and getting locked up on psychiatric wards. The same experiences repeated over again.

Except that by the third time in 3 years that I was detained under the Mental Health Act I no longer had the daily visits from friends and piles of cards and presents that had helped me survive my first two stints as an inpatient in 2009 and 2020. The few family and friends who were still in regular contact with me by my admissions in 2021 and 2022 were all exasperated that I didn't like taking 'antipsychotics' and had stopped them twice. And they also despaired that I wasn't making an effort with "self-care" or engaging with "psycho-education" like mental health services advised.

I ended up having to claim disability benefits, qualifying for Personal Independence Payment because I couldn't consistently manage things like getting out of bed and changing my clothes, preparing my own food or using public transport without support. The fact that I had once earned a first class degree, travelled the world, thrown parties, run campaigns and been a media spokesperson on prime time news shows was a distant memory. The fact that I had once felt like a competent and emotionally present mother… that was a constantly recurring and agonisingly painful memory.

I felt trapped in a never-ending nightmare. I believed that having children when I knew I had a severe mental illness was the most hatefully selfish thing I could ever have done. I saw no way out.

They say it is always darkest just before the dawn and the first chink of light broke through when I remembered that the psychiatrist on my last hospital admission had proposed putting me on lithium and taking me off the 'antipsychotics'. After I was discharged lithium had been added on top of continuing olanzapine. After months as a multi-drugged zombified version of myself I remembered that getting rid of the hated 'antipsychotic' had been put forward as a possibility so I asked to be taken off olanzapine. Once the 'antipsychotic' was out of my system I felt so much more myself. And I could think much more easily even though I still felt emotionally dampened on the lithium.

Then one miraculous day about six months ago it occurred to me that the problems with my husband might actually be part of the reason for my struggles with my mental health. I was part of a mum's Facebook group where women quite frequently posted anonymously for advice about their marital problems and the idea of posting my own story popped into my head. The response of those women online was almost instant and overwhelmingly supportive. They confirmed to me I wasn't just crazy—he had been acting in an appalling way towards me.

A few days later I found the courage to reach out to a group of old friends from my activist days and finally open up about what I had been going through in my marriage. Their response was amazing too and the elation of being believed and believing myself led me to an almost fatal mistake. I told my psychiatrist I had marriage problems and she hit me with a third social services referral.

I was in a state of shock. Although our relatively happy family life had unravelled into a much more chaotic and dysfunctional survival mode, I didn't think our problems were so serious that the children would be instantly removed from our care. But I was terrified I would completely crack mentally under the hugely intrusive pressure of social services involvement and lose everything.

After 3 days of non-stop frantic cleaning and tidying at home I had a prearranged date in my diary to see an old friend. He took me out for the whole day, driving out into the countryside for a walk in the woods and tea and cake and finally a visit to St Albans cathedral. I talked at this friend non-stop for about five hours. Though he said very little I got the sense that he completely understood everything, in

a way that perhaps only people who have been through their own traumas can understand.

When we finally entered the sacred space of the cathedral, I felt silence inside of me and walked past the soaring columns along the inside of the building just absorbing the atmosphere. And then an unfamiliar feeling rose up right from my tummy—"I feel like a somebody" I remarked mostly to myself, in an almost bewildered state of gratitude.

From then on my momentum felt unstoppable. I made the first available appointment with an online private psychiatrist and the feeling of liberation when I pressed send on the email informing my NHS psychiatrist I was transferring myself out of the mental health system was indescribable. I told the private doc that I wanted to taper off lithium and after a bit of convincing he agreed to prescribe the liquid form of lithium that I needed in order to gradually and safely reduce the doses.

I found the courage to confront my husband with the fact that our relationship could not continue as it was. And I found the conviction to hold my ground in setting my boundaries and rejecting the gaslighting I had been internalising for years.

I got through the stress of the social services investigation by going for long walks through London and boogying around my living room for hours listening to all the music I used to love.

I made contact with the psychiatric survivors movement and the allies working for change on the issue of mental health. I started building my own library of books by people like Robert Whitaker and Joanna Moncrieff. I listened to talks on YouTube by psychiatric survivors and activists like Jacqui Dillon and Laura Delano. And in the offline world the open mic music session and the survivors' poetry gig that I went to were so powerful.

I started to write about my own experiences in the psychiatric system but of course most people on my Facebook and X, as in real life, were either uninterested or just concerned I was going mad again.

I realised firstly that finally developing the ability to tell people who don't respect me to go **** themselves, at least in my head if not necessarily out loud, would transform my mental health in a way no "treatment" ever could.

Secondly, I was aware that to feel safe and begin healing from all the trauma I needed a few friends around me who were willing and able to listen to me vent and bare witness in some way to what I had been through. And crucially I needed people close to me who realised that the support I had always needed was not for family and friends to push me towards professionals and pills but ironically I had needed people to protect me from a mental health system that has done me nothing but harm.

So I ended up having a go at some of my old friends about how lonely I had become in all this, and finally I felt I was beginning to break out of my emotional isolation. I explained to anyone who would listen how psychiatric diagnosis is pseudoscience. I detailed how medications are just mind-altering substances that may mask some of our observable distress at great cost in terms of suppressing our emotions and cognition and causing other side effects. (Psychiatric drugs are not miraculous treatments like insulin for diabetes!). I pointed out that examples such as the infected blood scandal, thalidomide and the history of psychiatry (with treatments like lobotomy and insulin

coma therapy) prove that doctors are not infallible gods.

I shared with everyone I knew the fact that there's a debate within mental health. Some say professionals should tell patients that they are intrinsically disordered and drug them. Others say it's better to ask as a fellow human, "what happened and what do you need?"

I shared an only slightly sanitised version of my whole life story with all those I felt able to trust with it. And the fact that most of those friends listened supportively and one or two people knew from their own life experience exactly the right things to say has made such a difference.

It feels like my world is now turning from a 2D black and white existence to a full 3D technicolour life full of real human emotions and possibilities for connection. And it's not the manic "I'm elated because it feels like if I think fast enough I might be able to figure out a way to feel safe and justify my existence". It's more solid and grounded and less dependent on how others respond to me.

The endless stream of words in my head is slowing to the point that I can sometimes hear the sound of silence. And my concentration is coming back to the extent that I read several chapters of a book this morning, rather than getting through a few pages before finding myself staring into space.

Life is an ongoing journey—I know I will still need to find lots of patience and spiritual strength, but I just cannot believe how I am living a life that seemed impossible so recently.

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